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Generative Ruptures and Moments of Confluence

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“Unvergleichlich: Kunst aus Afrika im Bode-Museum/Beyond Compare: Art from Africa in the Bode-Museum,” October 27, 2017 to November 24, 2019, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museumsinsel, 10117 Berlin, Germany (<http://www.afrikaimbodemuseum.smb.museum/>)

What happens when a gallery space dedicated to exhibiting European art is interrupted by introducing African art objects? This essay reviews a temporary exhibition that introduced works of art from Africa, the property of Berlin's Ethnologisches Museum, into the exhibition space of the Bode Museum, whose collection consists of European art objects from the Classical to the Baroque periods. I offer a reading that is quite different than the curators', proposing art museums as institutions where philosophies are expressed in the form of art objects.

Key words: art as philosophy; African art; European art; Bode Museum, Berlin; Beyond Compare

The long-running temporary exhibition “Beyond Compare” introduces works of art from Africa, the property of Berlin’s Ethnologisches Museum, into the exhibition space of the Bode Museum, whose collection consists of European art objects from the Classical to the Baroque periods. The duration of exhibition has now been prolonged by several months, in part because in museum terms it has been stunningly successful and has been widely reviewed in both art and anthropology publications. The exhibition consists of two elements with strong, albeit rather different, curatorial intervention evident in both.

Opened in 1904, Berlin’s Bode Museum keeps largely to its original design. Apart from the temporary exhibitions display space in the basement, it is a series of period rooms with the interior of each room designed to show European artworks from different eras in the context in which they emerged as art. The art collection of the Bode Museum is renowned; indeed Neil MacGregor, former director of the British Museum, has celebrated the sculpture of the Bode Museum as “the most comprehensive display of European sculpture anywhere,” adding that through the sculptures a visitor to the Bode Museum can learn Europe’s history—aesthetic and religious, intellectual and political (MacGregor 2006: 36-37).¹

How to read what happens when a space designed for and dedicated to exhibiting European art is interrupted by introducing African art objects? There are of course many ways to interpret such displays, and the curators of “Beyond Compare” have developed two such possible readings. The Museum’s special exhibitions gallery on floor 0 contains a large number of both African and European sculptures dating from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries, all thematically grouped under such titles as “The Others,” “Aesthetics,” “Gender,” “Protections and Guidance,” “Performance,” and “Taking Leave.” The second element of the exhibition consists of twenty-two displays scattered in sixteen separate galleries across floors 1 and 2 of the building. The displays are set amongst the Museum’s permanently displayed European sculptures and paintings, and variously intensify and/or challenge the “resident” art objects. Each display juxtaposes single African and European art objects situated in close proximity. Here the terms of

comparison arise from the works themselves. Some pairs are compared on aesthetic criteria, others on social criteria.

I offer a reading that is quite different than the curators'. I propose art museums as institutions where philosophies are expressed. Public or civic philosophies of institutions of different times and places have informed the making of objects that near the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century find themselves displayed in the Bode Museum in Berlin: this is my premise. Or to say it more simply and generally: philosophy articulated as particular ethos perfuses the making and receiving of art objects in the disparate times and places they have been made; objects in art museums express philosophy. In this review I see myself as, in turn, doing civic philosophy in reading what happens when art objects expressing different world philosophies are juxtaposed within a European art gallery.

To propose art as expressing philosophy is not an original position; it is, for example, expressed in Henri Bergson's conception of art.² Here I mobilize Bergson's account as critically articulated by Lorand in reading *in situ* effects. Bergson's conception of art plays an important role in his philosophy, and contributes to philosophy of art in offering a way to read art objects as philosophy. Art is not the question for Bergson, rather it is the answer, serving as a major paradigm for illustrating some central philosophical arguments. Lorand proposes,

that Bergson's ideas of art [as form] comes close to a traditional concept of organic form. Works of art, like organized bodies, are stamped with individuality. They are sensitive to their context, and keep changing their meanings accordingly (Lorand 1999: 401).³

In other words, in this analytic framing, art objects pick up and actively refract, even reframe, their aesthetic surroundings, much as a plant expresses multiple and varied aspects of its situation in its form, thus revealing a mode of collective being as particular yet singular. Recognizing that in this framing, engaging with the exhibition and writing a review is work involving knowledge practices, I ask my readers to indulge an experimental approach to review writing which takes the form of auto-ethnography of the experience of visiting the exhibition.

I made four visits to the exhibition across a year, each visit taking up the better part of a day. In this way I cultivated ontic experience of the exhibition, wordless experiencing, albeit within a particular language world, experience later to be expressed in story. Long ago I learned from some helpful Nigerian children, bilingual in Yorba and English, that the ontic is not only knowingly habitable, but also that one's navigation within it happens in particular language worlds, albeit wordlessly. And further, that such navigation might be spoken of.⁴ For me the ontic is one aspect of the fractalizing interface where world philosophies might engage as confluence and/or in tension.

I read "Beyond Compare" as offering a vision of two world philosophies meeting as fractalizing interface. The usual "cultural hubbub" of the art museum, always artfully managed more or less successfully by curators, is exaggerated in the curation device of incorporating African art objects, expressions of African philosophies, into a European art museum display space. In my reading, I propose the exhibition's most successful displays as generating confluence: moments of particular singularity that happen amid the jangling and jostling of the exhibition's contesting multiple visions of what it means to be human. Such moments are brilliant expressions of humanity as such. The wonder of the "Beyond Compare" exhibition is that several such sublime moments are evident, but so too is some rather uncomfortable and ugly clashing.

The exhibition title remains puzzling given that the curatorial work in the exhibition is explicitly, even excessively, comparative. The curators' comparativism deploys both social and aesthetic criteria. In one section of the exhibition, criteria are taken to arise in works' imputed emotional load: both African and European art works are taken as mediating particular human

experience, like “experiencing others,” or “anticipating death.” In the exhibition’s other section, criteria for comparison arise either in some common social functionality—the items contain the bones of the revered dead—or in some shared (or not shared) aesthetic element—notably realism.

The very first display case that most visitors will come across, in the Museum’s Grand Basilica entrance hall, exemplifies this highly comparative approach: two bronze/brass figures set side-by-side in a single display case. Here “Putto with a Tambourine,” by fifteenth-century Italian artist Donatello, stands beside “Statue of the Goddess Irhevbu or Princess Edeleyo,” made in the Kingdom of Benin sometime in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. The curators invite visitors to recognize that at the beginning of the twentieth century one object was categorized as art object, the other as ethnographic object. The explanatory text accompanying the display uses the juxtaposition to comparatively describe how each item was treated by the institution of the state museum: the one as art, and the other as cultural artifact exemplifying “otherness,” infused with the “less-than-ness” implicit in European imperialism and colonizing—as ethnographic object. The take-home message of the explanation provided for this display contrasts the institutional accessionings of the objects by two separate museum collections, as evidenced in the African art object carrying its accession number and other markings on its shoulder and back, in a spidery white-ink tattoo. In the past these objects were not compared because, as everyone knows, you cannot compare apples and oranges. Now they are compared unproblematically as objects owned by two separate Berlin cultural institutions. Counterproductively, the explicit comparison of past and present institutional practices, with the implicit assumption that both objects remain the cultural property of the German State, despite the recognition of the dubious morality of the exchanges that enabled passage of the Benin goddess/princess from Benin City to Berlin, had me wondering if there has been much change in European colonizing habits of thought.

Despite my critical response to the curatorial framing as a philosopher who has worked with ontological disconcertment for many years, coming upon this display I felt a vivid delight in the juxtaposition: visual similarities connect—color, size, human body shape, and even posture. But these similarities, clearly material-semiotic superficialities in the meaning-making context of art, lie within an overall profound incommensurability. As art, each figure actively repels the other, yet it is difficult to discern where those tense mutually repellent forces arise. For me the display generated a moment of wonder: I felt that here I had indeed met something that truly goes beyond compare, despite the rather clumsy curatorial words. What I did appreciate in the display was the Bode’s brilliant display practices. And this, I would discover, was repeatedly evident throughout the exhibition. I would come to recognize that the proficiency in display techniques enhanced, and even afforded, my meeting the art objects as expressions of philosophy.

Proceeding from this display in the Grand Basilica down to floor 0, a sense of dismay assailed me as I viewed the grouping of displays under the titles of western social analytic concepts. Here we meet an orthodox European philosophy of art as an aesthetics, which has art objects as representing social and cultural values of the times and places they were made. The readers of these objects are taken as perceiving certain qualities in the objects which they value (or not), qualities which have been coaxed into being by the expert work of an artist, more or less effectively. This framing is appropriate to the extent that this is the philosophy that generally imbues the making of European art; it is a valid way to read European art in its own terms. But assuming this as a universal philosophy of art, as this element of the exhibition seems to do, is another matter. Using categories defined according to European social and aesthetic norms, here African art objects are insistently set beside European art objects to evidence some specified sameness; difference is readable within that sameness.

In the second element of the exhibition, displays take their comparativist cue from the objects themselves, not from imputed social or aesthetic categories. In this branch of the exhibition, pairs of African and European art objects are scattered through certain galleries of the museum, and it is in reading this element that my experimental ethnographic approach to exhibition reviewing becomes obvious. On my fourth and final visit to the exhibition in August 2019, I found displays in this element were being deconstructed; preparations for displays in Berlin's controversial Humboldt Forum were intruding. Fortunately for me the displays on the second floor remained untouched, so the experiment in experiencing I had planned was still feasible. I was headed for gallery 209, a display space that I knew well by then, having lingered in it on previous visits. There, in the center of the room was a pair of objects that feature in the exhibition's advertising. The Bwiti Figure, one of that pair, seemed to be the darling of the exhibition, and on previous visits I had observed that visitors often lingered in the room where it is displayed.

I ask my readers to accompany me as I ascend the stairs under the small dome and skirt around the "Beyond Compare" exhibit in gallery 208, where the exquisite calm of an *Oba* memorial head from sixteenth-century Benin in West Africa is placed side by side with anguish, in a gory, almost life-sized image of the decapitated head of St. John the Baptist served up on a platter. We enter gallery 209, a medium-sized, rectangular-shaped gallery with walls painted a maroon color. The ceiling of this gallery is largely glass, meaning it is flooded with natural light. It is one of three interlinked galleries permanently displaying French and Dutch art from the Late Gothic period. In the room's center, the objects of the "Beyond Compare" Exhibition, similar in size, are placed facing each other at a distance of around three meters. They have been paired solely on the sociological basis that both objects were made to house and preserve relics of the bodily remains of a known and loved human, one of whom was later canonized as a saint. Thus, both objects served the social purpose of mediating, or working as intermediate, in facilitating contact between the living and the dead, albeit in what were no doubt very different sorts of religious practices.

As their European art object, the curators of "Beyond Compare" have selected a reliquary bust of a bishop, an art object still containing its saintly bones, made in Brussels, Belgium and dated around 1520. This item became an art object in being presented to Charles V, the Habsburg Emperor remembered for splitting that vast kingdom into two as he abdicated the throne and committed himself to a monastery cell. The baleful-looking bishop is paired with a figure made in the nineteenth century within the Bwiti religious community of the Kota or Kélé people in the Republic of Congo or in Gabon. This Bwiti art object originally functioned as figure-head for a woven basket holding the bones of a venerated member of the governing lineage. In the act of the object being collected by some intruding European, the basket was detached, and the bones left behind as the figure became a traded ethnographic object that eventually ended up in Berlin. It is unclear where this particular figure originated. The exhibition catalogue notes that the existence of shrines constituted around such figures is known from,

late nineteenth century engravings which were made after sketches by French explorer Jacques de Brazza, [and that] Oskar Lenz [geological/minerals explorer] gave [the Bwiti Figure] to the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde in 1877 after his trips to the Ogooué River with the Deutsche Gesellschaft zur Erforschung Äquatorialafrikas (Chapuis et al 2017: 150).⁵

My experiment is designed so that I might experience the room both in its parts and in its wholeness, but might also meet the art objects both in their individuality and in their being the several items displayed together. As I enter the gallery, I begin by confining my attention to objects in the room's periphery. In addition to the "Beyond Compare" object pair, this gallery,

designed to display gothic-era art objects depicting Christian religious iconography, contains a total of twenty-three art pieces, mostly delicate wood sculptures. As I make my way around the walls, it seems to me that the objects compete, each subject matter proclaiming itself as the most pious, each piece aiming for a realistic expression of Christian religious piety. For the most part, female piety is on display here: St. Ursula arraigned Christ-like on a cross, or protecting supplicants in the folds of her cloak; clusters of women tending the lolling dead body of the Christ; beautiful young European women playing with the baby Christ-figure; clusters of women reading out of books. Male piety is featured in just three displays. In two of these we see men reading off scrolls, and in the third a large figure of archangel Michael is slaying a writhing devil.

After photographing each of these accompanying objects with my phone, I retreat to a far corner, drawing the attention of the security guard as I lurk suspiciously close the wall. My aim with this uncharacteristic gallery behavior is to try to experience “the room.” In contrast to my previous viewing of the “resident” objects, from this position I want to let the whole of the room’s display come into focus, vague though this must be. Now the “Beyond Compare” pair are in the picture; I am facing the diminutive Bwiti Figure. Watching other people enter the room, I see that the Bwiti Figure draws a visitor’s eye. Placed at the room’s center, it changes the room; it conducts and concerts its companion art objects.

The dissonance I have previously experienced in the implicit competition for attention (God’s?) in the gothic-era Christian objects turns to a calm around the Bwiti Figure. It seems quiet and still in comparison to those around it. A tenderness emanates from its smooth bronze-colored metallic surface. Shifting my gallery-gaze to include the Reliquary Bishop, the pair seem simultaneously both “yon,” beyond each other, and yet “par,” each other’s equal. Perhaps this is what the exhibition title means, I muse? Then, focusing solely on the Bishop, the bust suddenly seems tawdry; the banality of its mimetic, realistic representation of some actual bishop, has me almost laughing out loud, but I am aware of the rather aged, hovering guard keeping me squarely in his sights. I retrace my steps, entering again gallery 208. Now the sheer ugliness of the juxtaposition of a realistic image of an actual, severed human head and an idealized human-head ceremonial object is even more shocking. Is this contrast between galleries 208 and 209 anticipated by the curators, I wonder?

My experiment over, I retreat to the bookshop and a cup of tea. As I browse through the exhibition catalogue I feel sorry that these objects, perhaps stolen from the African places in which they first came to life, or at very least exchanged in conditions where power was distributed very unevenly, will not be in this museum space next time I come—coming to life in calling out the objects that surround them. Yet I also feel they will not be sitting comfortably in the new Humboldt Forum. The time of reckoning for modern ethnographic museums has come in Berlin, but it seems the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and its Humboldt Forum may not be ready to engage with its time and place.

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¹ Neil MacGregor, “A Cache of Civilisations,” *FT Magazine* 36, (2006): 36-37.

² Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchel (New York: Henry Holt, 1944).

³ Ruth Lorand, “Henri Bergson’s Conception of Art,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 39, no. 4, (1999): 400-415.

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- ⁴ Helen Verran, "Metaphysics and Learning," *Journal of Learning Inquiry* 1, no. 2, (2007): 31-39.
- ⁵ ed. Julien Chapuis, Jonathan Fine, Paola Ivanov, *Beyond Compare: Art from Africa in the Bode Museum* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2017).